

Universal Design for All 10-2010

How do you create a home that is functional as well as aesthetically appealing for those who are tall or short, young or old, left-handed or right-handed? Or those aging with visual challenges or in a wheelchair because of mobility issues? Universal design is the logical solution for these diverse needs. Incorporating some of the essential aspects of universal design, such as safety, accessibility, flexibility, and minimal physical effort, makes the living environment a comfortable and usable space by, as the word universal implies, everyone regardless of age or ability.

In the 1980's, Ron Mace founded the Center for Universal Design in North Carolina and described universal design as "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design." Since its initial introduction, universal design has gained a growing acceptance and has expanded into the next level for residential projects. Such features as comfort-height toilets, refrigerator and dishwasher drawers, and lever door and faucet handles are examples that have been readily integrated.

Having recently attended the fourth Universal Design Summit hosted in St. Louis, the overriding sense that I took away from it is the earnest and intense desire to engage homeowners and encourage them to embrace this concept that speaks so adeptly to potential, not limitation. With our populace approaching higher percentages of retirees, many having the desire to age comfortably, safely and independently in their own homes; building and remodeling with universal design allows control over the quality of life for later years. There are literally hundreds of ways to assimilate this inclusive design into home features, lighting, and controls that are easy to reach, see and understand. Differing height work surfaces and spacious counters, serviceable when standing or sitting, can be used by children, adults, seniors, and those with temporary conditions such as pregnancy or injury.

Designers, architects, builders and occupational therapists from across the country all came together to discuss means of expanding consumer awareness of the benefits of utilizing universal design in all areas – the community, public environments and residences. This synergy produced many possible avenues, but the main thrust for residential construction and renovation will have to be a strong economic motive for its use. The market will have to drive it. As homeowners become aware of how straightforward and advantageous universal design is to incorporate, the more they will invest in its inherent value. Universal design will be recognized as meeting the needs and fundamental interests of the consumer.

Look for qualified designers, builders and remodelers, who are credentialed and experienced in universal design and Aging in Place at home. Many members of the Greater Houston Builders Association and the Remodeler's Council have completed coursework and earned designations

such as CAPS (Certified Aging in Place Specialist). Having an in-depth understanding of the concepts enables universal design to “disappear” and blend in as just good design.

The next article in this 2-part series will delve into greater detail the different levels of universal design.

(Barb Mueller is President of Designs Anew Houston LLC, and a kitchen and bath designer who specializes in universal design)